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After 40 years, we still can't get our schools right

The Cambridge University report on primary schools highlights the fragile state of our education system.

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Britain has the best schools in the world. They produce highly-educated pupils who go to the best universities in the world, which also happen to be in Britain. Put that way, you wonder what all the fuss was yesterday when a report into primary education once again inspired an outpouring of national breast-beating about the state of our schools. The problem, of course, is that while we have the best schools in the industrialised world, we also have some of the worst. The people who benefit from the good (which are mainly, though not exclusively, in the independent sector) have to pay to educate their own children and deal with the social consequences caused by the failure of the bad. Where children from poorer backgrounds once had a way out through the grammar school, or the prospect of a relatively well-paid job in heavy industry even without a qualification, for most those options have now been closed off. The Cambridge University report into the standards of primary school education is the latest in a long line of studies that purports to suggest there is something fundamentally wrong with the way we teach our children in parts of the state sector. It maintains that education for young children is too narrow, too prescriptive and introduced at too early an age.

There is a good point here, but it should not be overdone. Parents want their children to learn the basics, what we used to call the 3Rs, when they start out at school. The fact that so many do not is part of the problem later on. So the Government was right to be sceptical about a study that suggests these are given too much importance. On the other hand, it was depressing to hear a minister instantly pooh-poohing a six-year study that is the most comprehensive look at primary education since the Plowden Report in 1967. Plowden set out a new framework for primary education that led schools away from the learning-by-rote approach that older generations will remember, towards a less structured pattern that reflected the more "progressive" thinking in the educational establishment at the time. From there, a lot of our problems derive.

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Some of Plowden's prescriptions are very similar to those in the Cambridge report. Plowden said: "The [best] school lays special stress on individual discovery, on first-hand experience and on opportunities for creative work. It insists that

knowledge does not fall into neatly separated compartments and that work and play are not opposite but complementary." The latest study makes startlingly similar points and calls for greater decentralisation and more empowerment of teachers. Yet Plowden resulted in such a decline in standards that government in the late 1980s felt obliged to reintroduce a structured curriculum, because children were not learning the basics. Too many still aren't.

More than 40 years on, we still seem unable to get the balance right, while other industrialised countries with whom we compete for jobs and wealth are leaving us in their slipstream. Even if levels of attainment have improved, social mobility has virtually stalled and international league tables show we are falling behind. This is caused by a combination of factors: the attitudes of some members of the teaching profession; family breakdown and the decline of deference; the gradual diminution of the authority of head teachers; too many national tests and too much emphasis on targets and league tables. A good number of our children will come out of school with the best start in life anyone can hope for. But for far too many they will have been wasted years and the harbinger of an uncertain, even bleak, future. The country cannot afford this state of affairs to continue. If an incoming Tory government has one principal task, it must be to reverse the calamity of the past 40 years.

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